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Interview with Shaun Tan

Shaun Tan is a Melbourne-based artist and author, whose work is celebrated worldwide for the beautiful, dynamic, and mesmerising story worlds that it offers readers and viewers. In 2011, Tan received the prestigious Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in honour of his contribution to international children's literature, and an Academy Award for the short animated film adaptation of *The Lost Thing*, which he directed with Andrew Ruhemann. Tan's work ranges from drawing and painting, to sculpture and animation, whose complex themes, and sensitive nuances resist easy classification. Instead, his sometimes surreal, playful, and evocative stories immerse readers into new and productively strange places.

1. As an initial query, could you tell us a bit about your approach to making picture books? Is it a fairly variable process with some common elements?

Yes, that's the best way to describe it, a fairly variable process with some common elements. The variably part comes largely from the subject, as this tends to dictate choices of style, format and approach, including degree of research and planning. For instance, *The Arrival* was inspired by immigrant oral histories initially, and evolved to have quite a long, photo-realistic narrative, mainly determined by the stories themselves. It also ended up being a comic, which is not a form I usually adopt, and a completely wordless one at that, which is also not something I am used to. In fact, the entire book was very different by completion to what I was thinking at conception (a short picture book with words), and fortunately had time to evolve over five years as a personal project. By comparison, a book like *The Rules of Summer* involved almost no research other than thinking about my own childhood memories, and has no narrative continuity really, being largely a shuffling together of random elements as a kind of approximation of disordered recall, rendered as large impasto oil paintings. It actually started out as a long comic and then turned into much shorter picture book, a kind of inversion of the development of *The Arrival.* Some books I seem to stop and start over a long period of time, abandon and pick up again. Others seem to come very quickly and fluidly, although usually after thinking about them in the back of my mind for many years.

What are the common elements? Well, they all start out as little pen doodles in notebooks, even when they are largely written texts. Mostly I begin with images, if only fuzzy mental images, but sometimes I begin with words. Either way, these are always tiny, unassuming and hesitant, as I've come to realise all good ideas tend to be. They are also very weird, again as good ideas tend to be – original ones at least. If they seem to have something resonant, I might develop these doodles into more detailed or fully realised drawings, time permitting. I will then write a bit, draw a bit more, write a bit more, and so on, changing the idea slightly as it bounces back and forth.

Once I think there is a story there, I will develop it in a more structured way, start thinking about page numbers, layouts, ways of actually realising images and texts. All of this takes place in small sketchbooks, usually about A5 in size. Once I have a plan in place, I will move on to writing or painting, depending upon what elements are primary, and I have a fairly methodical process for this phase of development. About three or four rough sketches, either drawings, digital collages or both, a gathering of visual research and references (anything from animals to colour schemes, or what a

lake looks like on a windy day) and then about 10 – 20 (or more) drafts of a written text. By this stage I know what I am doing, and most of the key creative decisions have been made, way back in those little notebooks, to which I constantly refer. The problem of a long and methodical process is that it can end up feeling laborious; a single painting typically takes me a week, and a book is about a year minimum. It's therefore important to have quick, spontaneous sketches as a strong reference point, to remember the energy of an initial idea, to not lose that freshness.

2. I love the sculptures you made for the collaborative work, *The Singing Bones* (2015), with Neil Gaiman. The way they're photographed really conveys the textures of the sculptures, and their presentation feels intimately connected with the elements of surprise, terror, and wonder that one might associate with fairy tales, particularly in their earlier iterations.

(Note, this was not a collaboration with Gaiman, but he wrote a preface. It was originally something of a collaboration (albeit very distant) with Philip Pullman, in his German edition of *Grimm Tales for Young and Old*. More about it on my website.)

That's great to hear, it was a very intuitive project, and actually quite different to the process described above now that I think about it! I did not make many preliminary sketches, and that's probably because working in clay is a lot like sketching already – you push and pull things until they feel right (literally as well as visually). And it was interesting to create a work that's only realised properly, in terms of basic appearance, in the very final stage of photography, where lighting was a very important component. It was also interesting to go back to a way of working I was more used to in my early years as a freelance story illustrator, of reading the work of another writer and responding to it, almost in a conversational way. I have particular respect for Grimm fairytales because they are so old, and not conventional 'literature' in a sense, as folk tales that often have forgotten origins and authorship. It's like finding old rocks in the ground, and I wanted my sculptures to look a little like that too.

3. I understand that some of the visual references for *The Singing Bones* were found in Inuit soapstone carvings and pre-Columbian pottery in trips to Canada, and Mexico, respectively. Could you talk a bit about how you arrived at the final sculptural forms, and the materials you used?

I used a technique familiar to me in childhood, taught by my father who grew up in a village in Malaysia. I made basic lumpy shapes out of papier mache mixed with tapioca flour glue; these are very light and hard when dry. I then worked over them with an air-drying clay called DAS, and painted them. Because I was not using fired ceramics (which I otherwise might) I could integrate different materials into the work, things that would burn in a kiln: sticks, bones, flowers, even food. There's also a fair bit of carving and sanding involved, which is probably my favourite part. As a child of about 12, I was semi-obsessed with carving soapstone after a school lesson in Inuit art, and I think I now have some kind of deep muscle memory for carving soft stones, it's just hugely appealing and I'm always pleased with the results (more so than with painting actually). Overall, my approach is actually very 'folk art', the kind of work I've seen on travels in places like Asia and Mexico, where the creators are not formal artists or producing

work for an institutional purpose. Just street art, and using whatever is practical, available and stands up without falling down.

4. Following on from the last question, the way that you incorporate familiar materials like sand, rock, fruit, flowers, nails, and beads into the sculptural pieces perhaps invites readers to imaginatively 'feel' the tactility of the objects, and linger in the hinterland of fairy tale world. Can you tell us about how you chose these objects, and reflect on the relationship between tactility, touch, and imagination?

They are very intuitive choices, sometimes random choices. I would be sculpting in my home studio and think 'I need something but I don't know what' and then go on a walk through my local neighbourhood, and notice rocks, leaves, berries, sticks, that sort of thing, collecting them along the way. The small flowers in Rapunzel all came from a little pocket of untamed front garden. This magpie-like improvisation also makes the work less pretentious for me, more child-like. Kids don't go searching for exactly the right medium, they adapt to what's in front of them. The material also affords a certain intimacy and scale, so you can see from cake decorations or flowers that these are small things, they are small table-top sculptures. I hope that the viewer also feels close to the process, prompted to think 'I could have made this' rather than feel baffled by skill and polish. At an exhibition of all the sculptures in Melbourne, I set up a big table with lots of plasticine and indeed people just started making their own Grimm figures without instruction – mainly adults interestingly. Beyond anything else, it's just fun, and very familiar. We aren't given much opportunity to play with clay as post-industrial adults.

5. I was thinking of your work in supporting the completion of Mel Tregonning's *Small Things* (2016), a beautiful work that glows with a capaciousness that encourages readers to think, and feel, their way through what might be taking place in that story world. Your own work in texts such as *The Red Tree* (2001) seems to offer a similar space for contemplation of feelings that aren't always readily spoken about, such as loneliness, hope, or questions about belonging and the unknown. I was wondering if you could reflect on images, whether drawn, painted, etched, and so on, and what they may offer in terms of exploring mental health, and their connection with the topics of mental health and wellbeing?

I guess the first thing to note is that themes seem to follow from images, and I don't – or rather can't – consciously pursue them. It's often a surprise to me that my books might touch on a mental health issue, as it's not uppermost in my mind and I have relatively little experience of mental health problems beyond occasional bouts of depression, far less serious than the problems of many others. I just keep thinking about certain images, or drawing certain things, and collectively they summon a kind of spirit onto the page that can be quite surprising, quite emotional. This is one of the pleasures of writing and illustration, that you actually *find out* what you are interested in, your hopes and fears I suppose, without necessarily realising it beforehand. So I do appear to have this interest in mental health / wellbeing.

Mel Tregonning comes from my home town and we communicated a little by email when she began her work *Small Things*, I was a kind of mentor, explaining publishing, and helping to win her a contract with a good publisher. I think she first became familiar

with my work through *The Red Tree*, which shares some similarities, in tone at least, to *Small Things*. I was shocked a few years later to hear from the same publisher that she had committed suicide, leaving her book unfinished, although actually very close to finished. All it needed was another artist to follow her detailed instructions and stitch together a few remaining pages, enough to fill gaps in a narrative which was already laid out in intricate detail. It was a project that made me think about a lot of things. What is art, why we need to speak with it, how it persists when we are gone. As well as the fragility of being alive in the first place, the balancing act of the mind and heart. I was mostly just gladdened to see that this book found a wide readership and critical acclaim, as Mel's voice is very sincere and unique: her untimely death is a great loss to the illustration and comics community.

6. The plasticity of the comics form makes it an ideal setting to explore themes such as memory and trauma, both of which often involve complicated relationships with time, temporality and loss. This is evident in your body of work, whether in the sepia-infused world of *The Arrival* (2006), or the indeterminate duration of connection and separation in *The Lost Thing* (2000). Could you comment on themes like memory and trauma in your work?

All writing and painting is memory; this very sentence is memory. And I guess artists are always trying to pin that down, or as Philip Larkin puts it, to preserve things. Part of that involved playing with time, and the perception of time, and comics are a medium that ponders this a lot. The static visual image in particular, has no clear duration, speed or timeline, and like memory it's not fixed in one temporal location, it can play out again and again. It has a certain permanence and accuracy, but also an ambiguity and subjective wobbliness, especially when it is hand drawn and clearly 'fictional'. I often try to reduce the 'noise' of words to focus more on this stillness and ambiguity, which is also often a central subject of my stories: the weird creature resting on a beach, the immigrant who moves as if walking through an old dream. Notably, there's a slightly retro feel to all of my universes; not so much that they are from the past, but are outside of normal historical time. *The Lost Thing* feels like a world of 1950's technology grinding away for many centuries, and *The Arrival* is like a 19th century of an alternate future. This helps me to broaden my imagination, and not think too much about specific times and places, to make things more like a dream.

As well as memory, I realise I have a big interest in forgetting. I feel a lot of social and political problems are caused by a kind of amnesia that's a natural part of our human neurology. The same thing that helps us recover from trauma also might lead us to forget the things that caused it, like guns or war. The ease with which nations talk about war as an option for resolving political conflict is mind-boggling after all recorded history, with all we know of its infinite consequences, and yet there it is, the 'option' of war, like a kind of cultural dementia. We forget old stories and need to be told them again. So I feel that fiction plays a big role in reminding us of things we already know, right down to small and tiny things too, and that's why we constantly need to write and draw new stories about familiar feelings and concepts. To check for value, reason and consistency, to figure out what's true and false. Comics are particularly good at this, because their language is often so idiosyncratic and personal, a bit diary-like.

7. You've spoken before about starting with 'small' ideas or doodles to develop characters or story world. It seems that this technique may encourage a sense of play and allow creators to tap into embryonic worlds. Could you share your thoughts on the links between imagination and its link with seemingly minor manifestations of creativity?

Yes, I think doodling – as a kind of silly, meandering drawing at a small scale – is a bit like dreaming. Embryonic is a good way of putting it, because you are not second-guessing too much, just playing with lines and letting things grow: shapes, ideas, words. I try to work in a fairly uncensored and undirected way, filling a sketchbook with a whole lot of minerals, and then going back over it to 'mine' it for any useful ore. Things that makes sense or suggest wider metaphors. Most of my most important characters or scenes come from extremely unassuming, scratchy drawings, clustered with a hundred other things that may or may not have been important. Over the years I've come to realise that these very subtle kind of creative acts, the quite fleeting tangents that your mind wanders off onto, are often the most important and a lot of the work as an artist is about understanding what good ideas are, interpreting your own daydreams, and figuring out ways to amplify them, to make them clear and accessible and, where possible, narratively satisfying. And all the while protecting a little of their mystery and original strangeness.

8. There have been some fantastic adaptations of your books, including, among others, the short animation of *The Lost Thing* (2010) Spare Parts Puppet Theatre's recent production of *The Rules of Summer* (2017), multiple stage adaptations of *The Arrival* (2009, 2017), the Opera Australia/Barking Gecko production of *The Rabbits* (2016), and the Australian Chamber Orchestra/Gondwana Voices collaborative project on *The Red Tree* (2008). Are there any other modes of adaptation of your work that you'd like to see?

None that I particularly fantasize about, I'm just not very visionary that way! In fact, these productions are all the brainchildren of other people, with far better understandings of dynamic media like film and theatre than myself. I'm very good at adapting to and working with those conditions, having spent a fair bit of time studying these audio-visual languages, but it's not something I'm great at initiating. My creative imagination always flows to a very small a quiet place in books or paintings, and hand-drawn imagery. But who knows what other media are on the horizon? By the time my daughter (now 4) is an adult, there may well be some kind of direct dreaming through neurological interface or whatnot, and I'd like to think that some of my work would adapt okay to such narrative forms. I probably won't be the one to spearhead it though; I'll still be drawing at a desk most likely, just doing what I know.

9. Your work to date spans across a wide variety of mediums and materials. Are there any processes that you'd like to experiment with in future projects?

Yes, maybe. *The Singing Bones* satisfied a very old ambition to illustrate a book using sculpture, that's something that I'd always wanted to do ever since I first began freelancing, so it's like a big tick on my list. Aside from that, I would not mind working on non-fictional subjects, and have thought about that a lot. *The Arrival* began life like that, doing research into migrant experience, and I've often reviewed work such as Studs Terkel's *Working*, interviews with ordinary Americans about their jobs. Those

modes of story-telling, which are not fictional, always interest me. As far as process goes, I think there's a lot to explore that I haven't thought of yet. The trick is always finding something that's conceptually interesting, but also practically viable. A lot of ideas are one thing or the other, but rarely both. And there's only so much time in the world, in between all the other things we need to do as functional adults! Making any kind of art always seems like a huge privilege, time that must be carefully spent, but also safely squandered in the pursuit of odd ends.

10. You're an avid reader of science fiction, and some of your readers may not know about your earlier work creating cover illustrations for science fiction magazines. What are some your favourite titles, and would you ever consider adapting stories in this field by, say, Isaac Asimov, HP Lovecraft, Ray Bradbury, Margaret Atwood, or Mary Shelley?

Possibly. Bradbury was a huge influence on me as a teenager, and probably the reason you are interviewing me right now, that I became attracted to genre fiction, and surrealist short stories, which comics kind of dove-tails into. I don't think about Bradbury much now, but the spirit of his poetic imagination continues to hold some sway. I'm working on a book of very short stories about animals at the moment, and it's only close to completion that it occurs to me it's quite Bradbury-esque. At the same time, I don't think I would actually want to adapt any of Bradbury's work: that's a very interesting question you've raised actually. I'm not sure why not. Perhaps it's because I wouldn't want to compromise the weirdness of his world, the fact it already seems complete, and in part it's because I don't necessarily align with his view of the world, or the occasional excesses of style (too busy with my own excesses!). That's true of a lot of artists and writers I admire, especially those with whom I share some similarities of style or genre. I enjoy their work greatly but couldn't necessarily integrate my work into theirs. I may well be better off adapting work that I don't know so well, or have little initial feeling for.

11. Finally, would you like to share some details about projects you are currently working on (or will be in the future) with us?

Yes, as well as the book about animals, which has a lot more writing than illustration, I'm working on a small picture book about a bug working in an office (for no apparent reason): a very simply idea that I've been thinking about for over a decade, but never got around to nutting out as a narrative. That will likely be published in Australia and the UK around July 2018 if all goes well. Keep a compound eye out for it!

Right now I've just completed an exhibition of 130 small paintings, all observed scenes of my local environment in the Melbournian suburb of Brunswick. This is the other half of my practice, when I'm not working with books, I just go out and paint very ordinary things. Partly it's about sustaining regular practise as a painter, but it's also a meditative way of thinking about things like beauty, truth, time, place, all those kind of big ideas but funnelled through tiny little scenes; the shadow of a discarded milk carton, a brick wall, a lane at night. You can see some of this work online if you visit the site of the local gallery *Tinning Street Presents*, the show is called 'Radius'.